

Further records of Small Buttonquail *Turnix sylvaticus* and 'mangrove white-eye' *Zosterops* sp in southwest Saudi Arabia

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This is a note on the first records in Saudi Arabia of Small Buttonquail since 3 February 1994 and 'mangrove white-eye' since February 1996.

Small Buttonquail *Turnix sylvaticus*

Small Buttonquail is a little known species in Saudi Arabia with Jennings (2010) mentioning there are few records from Arabia and its status is unclear although it may be resident in the southwest lowlands. There are only three records from Saudi Arabia (all southwest Saudi Arabia) in the Arabian breeding birds atlas database with the first a female seen by Ben King in a maize field near Matri, Jizan, 14 April 1976 (King 1978). King mentioned four species not previously recorded in Saudi Arabia in the introduction to his paper, but did not include Small Buttonquail although we have been unable to find any earlier records. Ben King (pers comm) mentioned that he knew of no earlier records of the species and



Plate 1. Small Buttonquail *Turnix sylvaticus*, Malaki dam lake, Jizan, Saudi Arabia, 3 July 2013. © Philip Roberts

the fact it was not mentioned as a new species for the country was probably an omission. One immature was at Wadi Jizan dam 28 June 1990 and Peter Symens reported two calling in a field near Malaki dam 23 January 1991 with two seen there 3 February 1994. Symens suggested that the species is a very local resident in southwest Saudi Arabia (Kirwan 1994). Stagg (1985) did not include it in his annotated checklist of the birds of southwest Saudi Arabia and Rahmani *et al* (1994) made no mention (an oversight, Stephen Newton pers comm) in their paper on birds from the Tihamah region of Saudi Arabia 1987–1994. Porter & Aspinall's (2010) field guide does not record its presence although it is shown as resident in two small areas of western Yemen. The subspecies thought to occur in Arabia is *lepurana*, the sub-Saharan subspecies, although recent DNA work has suggested that this subspecies may be too close to the nominate subspecies to warrant separate recognition (Pertoldi *et al* 2006).

The authors observed three Small Buttonquails in southwest Saudi Arabia in July 2013. One was located in the early afternoon of 2 July in a large grassy pivot irrigation field near Husayni along the main Ad Dabi to Sabya road (17.09582°N, 42.41627°E). The fields were very green with tall unidentified plants growing in them and some wide tracks where the pivot irrigation wheels had driven. The bird was seen whilst walking down one of the tracks in the field and was flushed at very close range giving good, if brief, flight views but was not seen again. In flight birds are readily identifiable from both Common *Coturnix coturnix* and Harlequin Quails *C. delegorguei* by their buff upper wing coverts, which contrast markedly with the darker back, primaries and secondaries and their

rounded wing shape rather than the pointed wings of the two quail species. The other two birds were seen at Malaki dam lake 3 July, the first running along the edge of a ploughed field (17.0158°N, 42.5969°E) giving good views as it ran down furrows and through the vegetation (Plate 1). Later the same day, in another area of Malaki dam lake, a presumably different bird was seen through a telescope walking along the dried up muddy edge of the lake by some reeds. The fact the new sightings were in July further suggests that the species may be resident in southwest Saudi Arabia.

‘Mangrove white-eye’ *Zosterops* sp

An unidentified ‘mangrove white-eye’ occurs along the Red sea coast of southwest Saudi Arabia but very few records of the birds have been published. They were found during a survey of southern Red sea mangrove stands in March 1994 when white-eyes were discovered between the villages of Shuqaiq and Amq, approximately midway between Jizan and al Qunfudah, in southwest Saudi Arabia (Newton 2006). This represented a range approaching 100 km, though it was thought it may have extended further to the north given the abundant mangrove stands, although subsequent surveys of these areas failed to locate any birds. The bird’s choice of habitat as well as smaller size, confirmed by biometrics when two birds were caught 1 December 1994, as well as brighter plumage (description of one obtained February 1996) compared to the nearby montane populations of Abyssinian White-eye *Zosterops abyssinicus arabs*, led to the suggestion that DNA evidence may be necessary to unravel the bird’s identity and until this is done the birds should remain unidentified and were best treated as ‘mangrove white-eye sp’ (Newton 2006). A comment in Porter & Aspinall (2010) under Abyssinian White-eye states a population of white-eyes present in the mangroves on the southern Red sea coast of Saudi Arabia and Yemen remains unidentified. Despite extensive searching no further data has been located on these birds and no other documented records have been found. In Oman, a small population of the Oriental White-eye *Zosterops palpebrosus* was identified in the mangroves of Mahawt island (Eriksen *et al* 2001) where they used similar habitat and occurred only in the canopy of mature mangroves similar to the behaviour of the ‘mangrove white-eyes’ in Saudi Arabia. The latter birds, however, appear not to be this species as they have differences in plumage and bill colour.



Plate 2. ‘Mangrove white-eye’ *Zosterops* sp, Either mangroves, Jizan, Saudi Arabia, 2 July 2013. © Philip Roberts



Plate 3. Abyssinian White-eye *Zosterops abyssinicus*, Raydah farm, Raydah escarpment, near Abha, Asir mountains, Saudi Arabia, 6 July 2013. © Jem Babbington

On 2 July 2013 whilst birding Either mangroves (17.16375°N, 42.40585°E), the authors saw two 'mangrove white-eyes' feeding in the top of mature mangrove trees at the water's edge. They were very mobile and kept high in the treetops although dropped down slightly in response to 'pishing' but moved off quickly. Although they did not give very good views a photograph was taken of one bird (Plate 2). The amount of white around the eye appears to be much larger on the 'mangrove white-eye' than on the Abyssinian White-eye from the Asir highlands taken at the same time of year (Plate 3). The location of Either mangroves is c75 km south of the southernmost location noted by Newton (2006) extending their range to over 175 km of the Saudi Arabian Red sea coast. The lack of records is interesting as a number of birdwatchers have been to the mangroves near Shuqaiq in recent years to look for Collared Kingfisher *Todirhamphus chloris*, an area within the range of the species, with no sightings of the white-eyes. Brian Meadows pers comm said that he never saw or trapped any in the mangroves at Yanbu well to the north of their original range, during the ten years he was present, and was convinced that no white-eyes were present during his residence 1984–1994, possibly because all the trees were stunted or young rather than mature.

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